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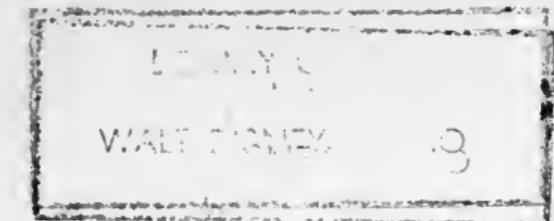


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# SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

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HENRY IRVING DODGE



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**SKINNER'S BIG IDEA**

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# SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

BY

HENRY IRVING DODGE

*Author of "Skinner's Dress Suit",  
and "Skinner's Baby".*



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HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS  
NEW YORK AND LONDON

**SKINNER'S BIG IDEA**

**Copyright, 1918, by Harper & Brothers  
Printed in the United States of America  
Published March, 1918**

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TO  
MY WIFE



## **SKINNER'S BIG IDEA**



## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

FOR years McLaughlin & Perkins had rested covetous eyes on the great possibilities of South American trade. For years they had builded and accumulated and prepared for the great drive down there, as McLaughlin used to put it.

“We'll go down there,” the senior partner would declare, “and we'll capture that Argentine trade, and then”—his eyes, half-closed, would take on a dreamy, long-seeing look, and his words would come slowly and he would stretch out his fingers and move them over his desk lightly as if he were actually feeling his way physically as well as mentally—“we'll creep up South America—expanding as we come—from sea to sea, taking it all in; all, Perk.” Then, enthusiastically:

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Yes, sir! I can see us getting right up to the Rio Grande, Perk, right up to the Rio Grande!"

"But why not capture Mexico first and work down?" Perkins broke in one day.

"Because," snapped McLaughlin, his dream of conquest interrupted by Perkins's matter-of-fact suggestion, "Argentina sets the fashion and the pace in South America. What she does the rest 'll do. My motto is, 'Always aim at the nose of a continent!' Aim at the nose—then the rest of it 'll pay attention more than it would if you only tugged at its coat-tails."

It had been an enterprising house, McLaughlin & Perkins, Inc., and the partners were young men, young in everything but years. They had borrowed money to go into business, which fact they used to brag about—once they had made a success of it—and had builded and saved and builded. They had extended their lines to all corners of the United States, and now they sought new worlds to conquer.

When they took Skinner into the firm—

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner, who had been their cashier and had lived in a cage where he used to incubate and evolve big ideas—McLaughlin became even more grandiloquent. “You see, Perk,” he’d say, with an effort at repression, for he realized that his enthusiasm at times found vent in noise, “we’ll have a central organization right here in New York, with Skinner in charge most of the time. You and I’ll have to do a bit of traveling, Perk—a bit of traveling.”

“I sha’n’t be sorry,” said Perkins; “I’ve looked forward to it all my life, traveling.”

“It’s been my dream, too,” said McLaughlin. “Next to Singapore, I’ve always wanted to see Buenos Aires and the Andes and the Amazon.”

With the aforesaid aim in view the partners presently arranged for a six months’ trip through the land of their dreams. It was eleven o’clock in the morning, just a week before the day of departure. Everything was bright. They had only the day before received an en-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

couraging cable from their correspondent in Buenos Aires. Yet they were not happy. McLaughlin paced the floor for some minutes, savagely attacked the point of an unresisting weed with his teeth, and presently heaved a deep sigh, a sigh that might have been a groan or inarticulate profanity. He turned abruptly to Perkins. "It's got to be done," he growled; "but I never hated to do anything so in my life."

Perkins thrust his hands into his pockets and smiled sardonically. Perkins was the sardonic member of the concern—outwardly sardonic. "I'll do it for you, Mac."

"No, you won't! You're too cold-blooded. It's a delicate job, Perk."

The idea of McLaughlin's doing anything in a delicate way made Perkins smile.

"Ask Skinner to come in," said McLaughlin. "Might as well spring it on him now."

"He's got Jacobs in there. Wait a minute; he's going now."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

The sound of Jacobs closing the door in the hall was followed by the entrance of Skinner into McLaughlin's room.

"I fixed everything up with him," said the youngest partner.

"Was he satisfied?"

"Tickled to death, Mac."

"I knew you'd handle him all right. You're a wonder, Skinner." McLaughlin paused, frowned; then: "Now I've got something that won't tickle you very much, Skinner, my boy."

At McLaughlin's words the fine-fibered Perkins started for the door.

"You stay right here, Perk!" cried McLaughlin. "What I've got to do won't seem so mean if you stay and help me out."

Skinner glanced from Perkins to McLaughlin quickly.

"Pull up a chair, Perk." McLaughlin waited until Perkins had seated himself, then turned abruptly to Skinner. "Skinner"—he paused and swallowed hard—"Skinner, Perk and I have been talking

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

something over. We want to know how you feel about it.” He paused.

“I’m listening,” said Skinner. “Spring it, Mac, spring it!”

“Skinner, we think there ought to be a change here.”

“Change is characteristic of progress, Mac,” Skinner observed. “But to be specific?”

“To be specific, we think we’ve got too many old men on the pay-roll.”

Skinner was silent, and McLaughlin construed his silence as opposition. “Perk and I didn’t want to say anything to you about it, Skinner,” he went on, “until we’d thrashed it out, pro and con, until we’d definitely decided that there was nothing else to do but let them go, because we knew you had a sentimental interest in these men that might warp your judgment. For we’re all human.”

“Mind you,” Perkins observed, “we hate to do this just as much as you do, Skinner, but we look at it from a different viewpoint. You see, it was only a little while ago that you were one of them.”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner was still silent.

McLaughlin affected not to realize Skinner's attitude. He went on in a matter-of-fact way: "To begin with, there's Hemingway."

"Hemingway's not an old man," commented Skinner. "He's only fifty."

"We pay him four thousand a year," said McLaughlin. "We could get a younger man to do his work for half that."

"But think what Hemingway knows about the business here! He's been with us for twenty years. He's had charge of that department for eleven years."

"He's only a machine," urged Perkins. "He has no initiative, no spontaneity."

"There's old man Gibbs," McLaughlin went on; "sixty! He does nothing but look after the time account of our men. A boy could do that."

"Gibbs did big work for this house, Mac — very big work," said Skinner.

"That's why we keep him at the same salary. Half his pay is in the form of a pension."

"There's no charity about that, either.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

If you were to count the interest on what Gibbs saved for us, it would amount to a good deal more than half his pay."

"Of course, we're going to allow him something right along. I thought you'd understand that, Skinner."

"It isn't the money altogether, Mac. This is his occupation. He has nothing else to do. He's all alone in the world. He'll be broken-hearted."

"But he's in the way, Skinner," McLaughlin urged, speaking very low. "We don't want him 'round. He's too—er—venerable for an up-to-date concern. Dead wood, that's what it is—dead wood. We're full of it here." McLaughlin drummed with his paper-cutter, as he always did when anybody opposed him, then broke out with, "There's Carlson and Boyce and Williams. First thing you know we'll have to pension them, too!"

"Why not pension them, Mac? They've drudged a long time to help build up our trade."

"Why not get rid of them before we have to pension them?" observed Perkins.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner stared at his imperturbable partner. "If I didn't know you so well, Perk, I'd think you meant that."

"It did sound a bit cold-blooded, didn't it?" Perkins observed.

"You understand as well as we do, Skinner," McLaughlin went on, "that this big South American venture is going to tax our resources to the limit."

"That has no bearing on this question."

"Yes, it has, too! To begin with, Mitchell and Fredericks and Winant and Lateret cost only half as much as Hemingway and Carlson and Boyce and Williams, and they're right in line of promotion for their jobs. And you can fill their places for less than they're getting now. Besides, we want these young fellows to master the new business we're going to get and grow up with it."

"Our present force can do that."

McLaughlin shook his head. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks, Skinner."

"And over against that very pretty

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

but exploded theory is that ancient truism, 'Never too old to learn.'"

"Oh, rats!" Perkins interjected. "Skinner's only talking for talk's sake, Mac. He's sentimental."

"Frankly, I am sentimental," said Skinner. "I don't like the idea of getting all the good there is in a man for twenty years and then handing him over for somebody else to pension."

"Can that stuff, Skinner!" said Perkins. "This is business."

"That's just what it is, Perk," cried Skinner, swinging 'round—"business, the most business kind of business! We've paid to educate these men not only in our own line of goods, but in our affairs. They have an intimate personal knowledge of the men and concerns we deal with, something no commercial agency could furnish. That education belongs to us just as much as it does to them. We have invested time and money in it. Why should we throw it away? No! We want to capitalize, exploit their wisdom and experience for our own bene-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

fit." Skinner turned to McLaughlin. "Remember, Mac, these men are at the very apex of their usefulness."

"That's the trouble, Skinner," rejoined McLaughlin, quickly. "Men don't stay at the apex long enough; they begin to go downhill." McLaughlin swung 'round in his chair. "Why, Skinner, for some time Perk and I have noticed that Hemingway and Carlson and Boyce and Williams are not as efficient as they used to be."

"They do their work, Mac."

"Routine work, yes! Just what they're told to do, yes! And that's all."

"That's just the trouble, Mac. You and Perk and I have been doing their thinking for them. We've always said, 'We've decided to do so-and-so; go ahead with it.'"

"Great Scott!" said McLaughlin. "What would you have us do? Let them run the business?"

"Not altogether. Do like Charley Schwab. He says to the head of a department, 'Don't come here and ask me what to do; come and tell me what you've

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

decided to do or what you've done.' That's the way to get the spontaneity, the initiative that Perk talks about. The trouble is, Mac, we've been paying our men for their wits and not using anything but their ability to add up columns of figures or spell words or formulate well-rounded sentences in writing letters. We've deadened their capacity for scheming, projecting."

McLaughlin heaved a deep sigh. He was tired of argument. "Skinner," he said, caressingly, "don't you think our judgment is entitled to some consideration? Perk and I have been running this business for a long time. We're honestly convinced that we must have young blood here."

"If you put it that way," said Skinner, "it's the only thing I can do. But it's against my best judgment, Mac."

"Oh, rats! Old man," said Perkins, slapping Skinner on the back, "it's sentiment! That's it—sentiment."

"It's settled, then, Skinner?" said McLaughlin.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Yes, it's settled, Mac."

"Skinner," said McLaughlin, "you're the youngest of us. We want you to let these men go while we're away."

Going home that night, Skinner was gloomy, depressed. He'd never before run up against the executioner proposition, as he put it. He didn't like the job. He went into the smoker and lighted a strong cigar. He paid small heed to attempts at conversation made by fellow-commuters; and after a time they let him alone.

Yes, he hated the job—hated it. But he admitted to himself it had to be done. Somehow he felt like a conspirator. He had known Gibbs and Hemingway and Boyce and Carlson and Williams—known them intimately for years. Not so long ago he had been one of them—a fellow-clerk. He thought with a pang how they'd all made a pet of him. What an ovation they had given him when he was made cashier! Even Boyce, who had thought himself slated for the job, had congratulated him. Skinner smiled to

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

himself as he thought how Boyce would have got the job, too, if he hadn't been such a darned good bookkeeper that they couldn't afford to change him. And how glad they all were when he got to be partner. They regarded him as a friend at court who would stick up for them, fight for their interests on the ground of old-time friendship.

And now he was going to cut their heads off, simply because they were old men. The thought made him wince.

When he was one of them Skinner had often heard the boys talk about other men who had got up in the world and then had thrown their old friends over. Probably they'd talk about him that way now. But that didn't bother him. What would happen to them? There was the rub.

There was Carlson—gentle, shy, faithful Carlson. What a small chance he'd stand of getting another job. And Williams—pudgy, comfortable Williams, always good-natured, always looking on the bright side of things. The Williamses'

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

one purpose in life seemed to be to do good to somebody—just to make up for their own childlessness, as Williams put it. When Skinner protested that they were giving away more than they could afford, Williams had said, “I’ll always have a job here with Mac, and there’s a little insurance to take care of her when I’m gone.”

“Damnation!” said Skinner, aloud.

“Huh?” said one of the commuters.

“Nothing,” said Skinner, and went on with his gloomy reflections. Hemingway had a boy in school. How Hem had bragged about that boy! How proud he was that he could put him through college! It was his one ambition—the ambition of a man who had had a passion for education himself and had never been able to get it.

“Damnation!” said Skinner, again.

“Huh?” said the fellow-commuter.

“Oh, nothing,” said Skinner.

And Boyce—gruff, cranky Boyce, with a streak of real gold in him!

At the tail end of Skinner’s somber re-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

flections came Gibbs—Gibbs, who had always had white whiskers ever since Skinner 'd known him. He used to wonder whether Gibbs had ever been a boy and then a young man and then a middle-aged man. He had always regarded him as an old man. Gibbs was a handsome old chap—always an old chap. He had an eagle-like nose that gave him an aristocratic bearing, and he lived in a boarding-house near Union Square. Skinner had always woven romances about Gibbs, the old hidebound agnostic who had boasted that he wouldn't believe even if one came back from the dead—not much! For years Skinner and Gibbs had made a point of dining together on the twentieth of every month. And it was always "Gibbs" and "Will" then. What kind of a raw hand-out were they passing Gibbs after years of faithful service?

"Damnation!" said Skinner, out loud.

"Huh?" said the fellow-commuter.

"Nothing," said Skinner. He looked 'round.

"Meadville!" yelled the guard. Skin-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ner jumped up and made a dash for the door.

"I never felt so blue in all my life," said Skinner to Honey that evening, as he was dressing for dinner.

"What's the matter, dearie?"

"The darned inconsistency of it all," Skinner growled.

"Inconsistency of what?"

"Here I am getting ready for a jolly birthday dinner, and there's nothing in front of me but the depressing picture of Gibbs and Hemingway and Carlson and Boyce and Williams."

"What's the matter with them?" asked Honey, apprehensively; then, after a moment: "I suppose there's no use in my asking you anything. You don't pay any attention to what I say."

The reproach brought Skinner out of his fit of abstraction.

"I've got to let them go."

"What?" cried Honey. "What do you mean?"

"Sack 'em."

"Sack 'em?"

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Yes, sack 'em—hand 'em the blue envelope," said Skinner, impatiently.

Honey looked dazed. "I don't grasp—"

"Mac and Perk insist they've got to go."

"They haven't done anything wrong, have they?"

"Yes," Skinner snapped—"the worst kind of wrong nowadays; they've got old! Dry rot—dead wood, Mac and Perk say."

"But you urged Mac not to do it?"

"Of course, I did."

Honey's eyes opened wide. "And he wouldn't take your advice?"

Skinner shook his head.

"But you're a partner," Honey protested.

"One partner doesn't hold up a scheme like that; especially the youngest partner."

Honey's eyes flashed indignantly. "The idea of their not listening to you when you know so much more about everything than they do, dearie!"

Skinner laughed. "They did listen to me; that's all the good it did." Skinner

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

was silent for a moment, then blurted out, disgustedly: "There's something wrong with the whole blooming business system. The idea of throwing men out just when they're beginning to get some sense! This young-blood obsession makes me tired."

"But what did you say to Mac?" Honey insisted.

"Everything—the economic side of these men—how valuable they were just at their time of life—their experience and all that. But it didn't do any good. Mac and Perk had it all doped out. Mac's only answer was to harp on 'young blood.' Young blood—bah!"

"Too bad; too bad," said Honey.

"There, there!" said Skinner, as they started down-stairs. "I ought not to have told you this till after dinner."

"Why not, dearie? Aren't we partners?"

Skinner patted Honey's arm fondly.

Nobody knew what an inconsistent thing this particular dinner that marked the fortieth milestone of William Man-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ning Skinner's career was but Skinner and Honey. Every reference made to the occasion seemed to be designed with sardonic significance. Everything seemed to have a direct bearing on the sacking of the old men. Everything seemed to accentuate the folly of what Skinner was about to do, the absurdity of McLaughlin's and Perkins's new idea of throwing their best human material away—chucking their aces and kings into the discard.

"Heavens and earth—forty!" cried Mrs. Colby. "You don't look a day over twenty-eight."

"Skinner's a young-old man, remember," said Humphreys.

"Just getting into the middle-aged class," piped little Jimmy Dooling, who was sixty-five and a millionaire.

"You'll keep on developing for thirty years, Skinner," Briggs chimed in.

"And then you'll sail along an untroubled sea of ripe efficiency for twenty years more," Mrs. Devereaux added.

Skinner groaned inwardly at each felicitation and politely said, "Thanks, aw-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

fully." The fact that he was aware that Honey knew just how he felt and purposely avoided meeting his eyes whenever a particularly telling, though unintentional, shot was fired didn't add to his happiness.

"Tell me, Mr. Dooling," said Skinner, suddenly, "how long can a man stay in the middle-aged class?"

"Don't know," said Jimmy. He paused and meditated a bit. Everybody waited for the oracular words, for Dooling, remember, was a millionaire. "A man can stay in the middle-aged class just as long as he wants to, the same as he can stay young as long as he wants to, or get old just as quick as he wants to."

"What do you mean by middle-aged, Mr. Dooling?" said Mrs. Colby. For be it understood the ladies of the party were quite as interested in the subject as the men, though in a different way.

"Anywhere from forty to seventy."

"Seventy!"

Jimmy grinned at Mrs. Colby's amazement. "I meant ninety."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Now I know you're poking fun at me, Mr. Dooling."

Honey noticed that Skinner was listening keenly to Dooling's words. "I'll bet he's got something in that dear old nut of his—something about the blue-envelope boys," she thought.

"Poking fun? I guess not!" said Jimmy. "They're advertising for men over sixty in New England."

"Did you see the ad. yourself?" said Skinner. Skinner knew Dooling wouldn't let so small a thing as the lack of a fact stand in the way of an argument.

Dooling didn't answer. Instead he produced a letter.

"Here is something I received from one of the greatest employers of labor in this country," he said. "Shall I read it?"

"By all means," said Skinner.

"Very good, then. Listen:

"I believe that in skilled work a factory that consistently employs so-called 'old men' would produce more goods per year than would a similar factory making exactly similar goods with a like number of young men. This would be due to two things: Less spoiled work on the part of the

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

more-experienced 'old men,' and better attendance at the factory—even allowing for the prevailing idea that 'old men' have more sickness than do young men. This assumed weakness of the average 'old man' is, in my opinion, more than counterbalanced by the loss of time on the part of the 'young man,' due to his having more interests outside of his business that appeal to him strongly enough to cause him to stay away from work."

"That applies to men working in factories," said Skinner.

"Not altogether," said Dooling. "Listen to the rest of the letter:

"In callings where experience or ability to reason from one's experience or the recorded experience of others is the foundation of a man's value, it follows that the man of forty to seventy is, in the main, better than the young man."

"Good!" cried Skinner. "Good! That's what I wanted to know. Anything else?"

"A matter of prime importance," said Dooling. "Listen." He read:

"My idea is to get a good man, no matter what his age, provided he is normal in health. If we could, as a nation, get our people to pay more attention to their health, Doctor Osler would have to add another forty years to his original forty."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>An authentic letter.  
[ 23 ]

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"How interesting!" exclaimed Mrs. Colby. "How very interesting!"

"Who'd have believed it!" said Humphreys.

"I've had experience—I know!" exclaimed Dooling. He paused, then: "I've made most of my money out of men over forty. I let other men pay for their education—then I get the benefit of it. Just as the writer of this letter says, it isn't that they do more work, but that they do better work than young men, and it doesn't cost you so much to pay for the damage they do."

"I've always understood that men's inventive faculties begin to wane at forty," said Mrs. Colby.

"Ridiculous!" said Dooling; "ridiculous! I never began to invent till I was forty. I was an old man, then. I didn't like being an old man, either—made up my mind I'd never be old again—not if I knew it!" His china-blue eyes twinkled like diamonds set in a withered peach.

"An old man at forty," said Skinner, "and a young man at—er—er—"

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Sixty-five," Dooling supplied. He grinned. "And getting younger every minute!"

"How do you account for it?" said Skinner.

"Simple enough," said Mrs. Colby. "He thought young thoughts. He associated with young people and all that sort of thing. Mental, that's the whole thing—mental!"

"I call anything mental that has wits to it," said Dooling, stirring uneasily in his chair, lest Mrs. Colby's words precipitate one of those ultra-modern discussions which he didn't understand and which he cordially disliked.

Honey realized that Skinner's mood had undergone a gradual change while they were talking. Out of the tail of her eye she noted the keen interest that he took in Dooling's words. So she was not surprised when, at the first break in the talk, he exclaimed, with real Skinneresque enthusiasm:

"By Jove! I've got an idea!" He looked around, then, "Yes, it's a big idea!"

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Just get it?" said Briggs.

"It's been coming to me all through dinner—just arrived."

"Let's have it, Skinner," said Colby.

"Wait a bit. Not quite ready."

"Bluff," said Humphreys, "bluff!"

"Not much it ain't!" cried Dooling.  
"I know Skinner. There's two brands of Ideas I take stock in—the Dooling brand and the Skinner brand. I put mine first because that made me rich. Your brand hasn't done that for you yet, Skinner—not yet, but soon."

"Good!" cried Colby, taking the cue and raising his glass. "Not yet, but soon! Here's to you, Skinner, and your big idea! May you never grow old!"

A week after McLaughlin and Perkins had sailed Skinner said to Honey over the dinner-table: "I've just begun to realize that there are two sides to this 'old man' proposition."

"What do you mean, dearie?"

"Just this: Mac is right and the blue-envelope boys are right. Mac is wrong and the blue-envelope boys are wrong.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

It's this way, Honey: I've told you what Mac said—what his attitude was."

"Well?"

"Mac has always regarded the boys in an impersonal, mathematical way. He has seen them only as machines, tools—something that was expected to produce certain results. And he was right from that point of view. But I knew the warm-blooded, human side of them. That prejudiced me, as Mac said; warped my judgment."

"To be concrete?" said Honey.

"To be concrete, Gibbs and Hemingway and Carlson and Williams and Boyce have always been in the habit of reporting directly to Mac and Perk—they've kept doing it ever since I became a partner. The result is, I never got a line on that side of them. But since I've had full charge I'm beginning to get Mac's point of view. I realize now what he meant when he complained that the boys lacked initiative. I can see now that they were in the habit of going to him for decisions on the most trifling matters."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner sipped his demi-tasse in silence, then suddenly burst out enigmatically and, so far as Honey could see, without any provocation, "Ruts!" He paused, then went on: "The boys have been living in ruts so long that they can't see there's an outside world. They're in 'em so deep that they can't see over the sides. They've forgotten that there's a blue sky above, plenty of sunshine. They've got rut egotism; and that's the worst kind—the father of 'em all."

"What are you going to do about it, dearie?"

Skinner laughed. "I'm kind of up against it, Honey. It's a delicate matter. I can't go to the boys as Mac or Perk would. They'd think I was trying to patronize them just because I was a step higher. They'd think I had a swelled head."

"How are you going to do it, then?"

"I'm going to give them a jolt—jolt them out of their ruts—make them realize. Realization is the first stone in the foundation of reform, you know." Skin-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ner mused. "Yes, it goes even further back—it's the digging of the hole for the foundation."

"But how jolt them out, dearie?"

"Don't know. It'll come to me all of a sudden. Such things always do."

On the way to town the next morning Skinner pondered on how to jolt the blue-envelope boys out of their ruts and didn't get the idea till he reached his office. Then his subliminal self, which had been working on the puzzle, plumped the answer at him, and he sent for Hemingway.

"Hem," said Skinner, when that gentleman appeared, "I find that the extra work that was thrown on my shoulders when Mr. McLaughlin and Mr. Perkins went away is too much for me. I'm going to ask you to take charge of the entire Northwestern territory that Mr. Perkins used to manage." As he spoke Skinner watched Hemingway through half-closed lids.

Hemingway was nervous. "Of course I shall come to you, Mr. Skinner, for in-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

structions? I shall be guided by you in directing the work?"

"Not a bit of it!" said Skinner. "You're just as familiar with that work as I am. Most of it used to pass through your hands, anyway."

"But," stammered Hemingway, "I never had the say, the deciding."

"You'll have it now," said Skinner—"the whole say. I'm going to hold you responsible."

Hemingway was clearly distressed. He opened his mouth as if to protest, but Skinner cut him short. "That's all, Hem, old man. Just ask Boyce to come in here, please."

"Jolt Number One," said Skinner, as Hemingway closed the door behind him.

Clearly Boyce had been put on his guard with that electrical method of communicating intelligence that obtains in office politics, for he was nervous before Skinner had a chance to speak to him.

"Boyce," said Skinner, "I want you to look after our California business. I find I can't do it with all my extra work."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"I'm not very familiar with that line, you know, Mr. Skinner," suggested Boyce.

"I'll have to ask you to get familiar with it, Boyce. You have every facility right here. Winant 'll help you. I'm going to give you full latitude, hold you responsible."

"I shall look to you for guidance, Mr. Skinner?"

"Boyce, I'm going to ask you to look to me for nothing. You're just as good a man as I am. You must use your own judgment. Please ask Carlson and Williams to come in."

"Jolt Number Two," said Skinner, with a smile, as the door closed after Boyce. "Williams," said he, a moment later, "I'm going to ask you to help Hemingway look after the Northwestern trade; and, Carlson, I wish you'd put your shoulder to the wheel with Boyce. He's going to look after our California business. Their work will be very heavy, boys, and I want you to relieve them of as much responsibility as possible. Hemingway

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

and Boyce will organize their departments as they see fit."

"A word with you, Gibbs," said Skinner, as he passed out to lunch. "I'm going to fire that boy outside. I've had a good deal of trouble with him and the girl at the board. I wonder if you, in addition to what you have to do, wouldn't reorganize that end of it. Take entire charge. See that the switchboard girl pays proper attention to business. Meet our important customers. You know, Gibbs, it takes a man of experience and tact to fill that kind of a job. I am going to ask you to do it as a favor to me."

For the first time in years the office force of McLaughlin, Perkins & Skinner found itself working overtime. Skinner knew this would happen when he put the extra work on the blue-envelope boys. That's why he did it, for, as a matter of fact, his executive ability was such that he alone could have despatched the work of McLaughlin and Perkins with small extra effort. In accordance with his scheme for the jolting of the boys out of

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

their ruts, Skinner, too, worked overtime—or made a bluff at it. He wanted to seem not to be shirking any of the burden, but his real purpose was to observe how the jolting process was coming out.

“Are the blue-envelope boys out of their ruts yet?” said Honey, a week later.

“No, but they’re working nights to get out. Hem’s lagging a little, that’s all.” Skinner sipped his demi-tasse; then, after a pause, “I’m going to give ‘em an extra jolt to-morrow—particularly Hem.”

And Skinner did give Hemingway an extra jolt—a very extra jolt. “Hem,” said he, the next morning—“Hem, I’m worn out with working overtime. I’m going to take a ten days’ rest. I want you to run things while I’m away.”

Clearly this new responsibility suddenly thrust upon him was a shock to Hemingway, but he braced up. “I’ll do the best I can.”

“And the best you can do, Hem, is good enough for me. Always remember that.”

“Thank you, Mr. Skinner.”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"I'll tell Boyce and the rest of the boys to report to you."

Hemingway coughed apologetically. "It might be better not to do it, Mr. Skinner. You know there's such a thing as jealousy in office politics. Things'll run along quite as well."

"No, they won't," said Skinner. "There must be a head, must be authority. I shall hold you responsible."

The next ten days Skinner spent at home, which greatly perplexed Honey, since he offered no explanation. When she hinted at such a thing he said, "I'm only working out my big idea."

"I can't see that you're working out anything, dearie."

"You're right. I'm letting it work itself out."

"I see," said Honey.

But she didn't see. Skinner was not available for pumping, even by Honey. When he had anything to say he said it; and he didn't say it until he was good and ready. Honey was very well aware of this trait in her clever husband.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner spent every morning motoring with Honey, but in the late afternoon he always managed to get back to some railway station in time to catch a train for New York.

The third day of Skinner's vacation the house out in Meadville was called up from the New York office.

"Yes," said Honey, answering the 'phone. "Yes? Oh, good morning, Mr. Hemingway! I didn't know your voice. . . . No, I can't reach him. . . . Sorry, but it doesn't make any difference even if it is very important." After delivering herself of the prearranged lie, Honey lied a little on her own account. "His health's the most important thing just now, you know; the doctor said—" Honey swallowed hard. She could go no further. "You understand. . . . No—I can't reach him—I'm sorry. . . . Good-by."

Honey hung up the receiver and turned to Skinner, who was lounging in a great chair, with a cigar and the morning paper. "It's dreadful to make me do this, dearie.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

I feel just like a mean, contemptible old liar!"

"There's no question of your being a liar, Honey," said Skinner. "But you're doing it in a noble cause. You're helping out my big idea. . . . I wonder what Hem wanted," he mused.

"He said it was most important, that he was very anxious."

"Good!" cried Skinner. "Good! He's getting anxious. That's just what I wanted. He's beginning to climb over the edge of his rut."

What Skinner said was true. Hemingway was beginning to climb over the edge of his rut; he was climbing faster every minute, if Skinner only knew. At first his steps faltered, but he reversed the law of nature and acquired momentum as he ascended. The wine of new authority had begun to work in him. It began to tingle through his well-regulated veins—a novel sensation to Hemingway. It quickened his wits. He began to think of the schemes he'd evolved in the past, schemes that he'd got tired

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

of suggesting to the dominating McLaughlin, who had always waved them aside indulgently. By jingo! if he only had time he'd put some of 'em in practice now, while he was in charge!

For fear the boys would think he had a swelled head, Hemingway was almost formally polite to them. And he overdid it, as the ultra-modest are very apt to do. "Would you mind doing this?" or, "I'd be greatly obliged if you'd help me out in this matter." But underneath his words was the ring of new authority.

The third morning Hemingway got a shock. Danby, Brazot & Co., of Chicago, wired for 10,000 extra-B's, stipulating immediate shipment. The order was a big one, a most important one for the firm. Hemingway knew that McLaughlin had been put to it to get D-B's business—put to it hard—and had only landed it by representing that he was prepared to fill any demand at any time. But if he, Hemingway, should fill D-B's order for extra-B's right now, he'd have to cut down Hillquit & Briggs's order to

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

6,000. H-B was a big house, a much older customer than D-B. McLaughlin had kept their trade against all opposition. And Hemingway knew that H-B was very busy—unusually busy.

Being put in full charge of the business by Skinner had given Hemingway a remarkable new courage, the kind of courage the small boy who is afraid of the dark has when the sun is up, the boy that brags he is not afraid of ghosts.

He had resolved, now that the long-deferred opportunity had arrived, that he would demonstrate to Skinner that he, Hemingway, had initiative, decision, courage—equal to any emergency.

But Hemingway hadn't reckoned on any so big an order as Danby, Brazot & Co.'s wire contained. It was a real crack in the nose to him. It staggered him. The responsibility of making a decision on the question it involved overwhelmed him. The courage that the wine of new authority had given him was not equal to the strain. He faltered—faltered weakly. He called up Skinner's house in

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Meadville, and when Honey answered the 'phone he urged her to communicate with her husband the importance of his message. But she was adamant—soft-spoken and sweet, but adamant. Hemingway knew the type.

"No use," he growled, disgustedly, as he hung up the receiver. "You can't make a woman understand, when her husband's health's involved."

Hemingway strode back and forth across the office. "By jingo!" he said, resolutely, which was about as near profanity as the ultra-conservative Hemingway had ventured for years. "By jingo! I'm glad I didn't get Skinner on the 'phone. I'm glad I've got to decide this thing myself. And I will decide it, if it takes a leg."

He took two or three turns more, nervously, then braced up and went to the telephone and called up his brother-in-law, Jimmy Lane, with Bidley, Wicks & Co.

"Jimmy," said he, when that worthy answered, "I want you to get McDonald

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

to find out if Starr-Bacon will sell him an option on 4,000 extra-B's at 90. Pay anything within reason for the option. Bring the paper here to me. Now, Jimmy, be sure and hide your tracks very carefully, you understand."

Two hours later Lane handed Hemingway the option. The price of it made him wince, but that didn't matter.

"Good!" he cried. "Now the whole world may go to the devil!"

He wired Danby, Brazot & Co., Chicago: "Will ship 10,000 extra-B's at once." Then he turned to his brother-in-law. "Jimmy, you did a good job—a good job—and I'm grateful to you. I don't care a darn if I have to pay for that option out of my own pocket. I never felt so good in all my life. Come to lunch."

And Jimmy, somewhat perplexed, but non-interrogative, went.

Boyce, too, began to feel the tingle of the wine of new authority. And so did Williams, for Williams, be it understood, was now directing three typewriters in-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

stead of one. Even Carlson, who was relied upon to manage one branch of Hemingway's department, was beginning to discover things over the top of his rut.

But wine of new authority, just like any other wine, produces elation up to a certain point. But in the background —behind the elation—is always the dread, more or less vague, of reaction, recoil, dire consequences. Apprehension steals in where exaltation strode. Gradually apprehension edges exaltation aside. While the blue-envelope boys reveled in the intoxication of new authority, they realized that the strain it imposed was heavy. They began to fear that they might not be able to keep up the pace, that the sweets of this new thing might be snatched from them.

And Gibbs worried most of all. Gibbs was greatly elated at first. His new job afforded him the kind of work he loved. He had always hated the abrupt, enemy-making methods of the red-headed office-boy—of all office-boys. He had under his breath damned the stupidity of em-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ployers who, through a false sense of economy, tolerated such destructive nuisances. Being a past-master in old-fashioned politeness, Gibbs had many times rehearsed the manner in which the outside man—as he used to put it—should treat a customer. And now he was to have his chance. He had been brought out of his hole in the corner, where he had drudged—half asleep—over time-sheets, day after day, into the sunlight of a new experience. He met new men, important men. At last he had a chance to hobnob a little with somebody who was worth while, to brag a little, to exercise the personal and social qualities upon which he had always prided himself, to make friends for the house.

Everything went beautifully in the outside office. Hemingway had complimented Gibbs, and so had Carlson, and so had Boyce. But presently a thorn entered Gibbs's flesh, a thorn in the shape of Guenivere O'Brien, the switchboard-girl. Guenivere refused to take Gibbs seriously. This was a shock to his van-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ity, for he'd always flattered himself that he was no negligible proposition with the ladies. Likewise it violated his official dignity, for Skinner had particularly instructed the switchboard-girl that she was to report to Mr. Gibbs, the new superintendent of the outside office.

Gibbs did not realize that he was operating under a handicap in his relations with Miss O'Brien. As a matter of fact, there had existed between Guenivere and the red-headed office-boy the sympathetic offensive-and-defensive alliance that always obtains between female switchboard-operators and office-boys, no matter what the disparity in their ages. Such worthies are sufficient unto themselves, regarding the whole outside world as available for harrowing through the agencies of impudence, neglect, stupidity, laziness, mendacity, and snubbing. When such propensities are used co-operatively by a switchboard-girl and an office-boy their destructive efficiency is raised to the *n*th power.

At first Gibbs gently corrected Gueni-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

vere. He was ignored—disdainfully, gum-chewingly ignored. He chided. Guenivere was scornful. He reasoned, he argued. Guenivere was oblivious, reading a novel the while. If the fluffy Miss O'Brien had only been a man, Gibbs might have resorted to profanity, for Gibbs, be it understood, was no saint. But she was not a man, and so the thorn in Gibbs's side continued to irritate, inflame—until he was well near desperate.

At the end of the tenth day, fully satisfied with what he'd accomplished by his afternoon trips to New York, Skinner took Honey into his confidence. "It was all for the working out of my big idea," he said. "I waited until I'd put it to the test before telling you."

"Oh, dearie, you're so wonderful!" cried Honey.

"Oh, I dunno," said Skinner. "Just common sense, that's all." Then he added, "I may have something interesting to tell you to-morrow night—after I've seen the boys."

And Honey waited impatiently all next

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

day for the interesting news she was sure Dearie would bring her from the city that night.

“Well?” was Honey’s first question that night at dinner, postponed until Skinner had begun to sip his demi-tasse—beginning to sip his demi-tasse was Skinner’s official way of notifying Honey that he was now open to interrogation—“how about the blue-envelope boys and the big idea?”

“Fine!” said Skinner. “Fine! Couldn’t be better! Found them worried and tired to death.”

“Mercy!” cried Honey. “What do you mean?”

“Tired from the effort of climbing out of their ruts. Worried for fear they won’t be able to keep up the pace.”

“Dearie!” said Honey, reproachfully.

“I’ve dug the hole for the foundation that I told you of,” Skinner went on, enthusiastically. “I’ve made them realize they’re old men.”

“How could you do it, dearie! It was cruel.”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

“Perhaps it was, but you wait! I’m going to begin to build.”

“Build?”

“Build the blue-envelope boys up. Make young men of ‘em. Rejuvenate ‘em—rejuvenate ‘em!”

“They won’t let you. They’ll never consent.”

“Consent?” Skinner laughed. “I’m going to do it without their consent. They won’t know anything about it.”

Honey laughed. “Why, dearie, it’s positively uncanny! You can’t change men without their knowing it.”

“Can’t I?”

“But how, dearie?”

“Never mind, Honey. Just watch me! I’m going to give you a lesson in the power of suggestion.” Skinner paused for dramatic effect. “I’m going to begin on Gibbs.”

“Gibbs!” Honey’s eyes opened wide. “That old hidebound agnostic!”

“There’s nothing so enthusiastic as a reformed agnostic.”

“He wouldn’t believe you in a thousand

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

years, even if you told him what you told me last night about how you did it all."

"My dear Honey," protested Skinner, indulgently, "an agnostic loses faith even in himself after a while, and when he does that's your chance. Gibbs was the most conceited man in America until I made him boss over that little Guenivere O'Brien. I knew she'd break through the shell of his egotism, if anybody could —the utterly frivolous, careless, gum-chewing, slang-slinging, alluring, good-hearted little devil!" Skinner laughed. "Gibbs told me to-day that he hadn't thought it possible that a little body like that could hold so much hatefulness." He paused. "Yes, I think Gibbs is worried."

"When are you going to begin on him?"

"Oh, Honey, that reminds me—tomorrow's the twentieth."

"I see. You dine with him, don't you?"

"Gibbs," said Skinner over their coffee next evening, when they had lighted ci-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

gars, "you wouldn't believe I celebrated my fortieth birthday just before the boss went away, would you?"

"Well," said Gibbs, looking at Skinner with a judicial eye, "hardly. But I would the other day, Will."

"Curious," said Skinner.

"Not at all," said Gibbs. "You looked forty, all right—more, too. But now—well, you look as fit as a fiddle. Yes, you look about twenty-eight, I guess."

"I was worried," said Skinner—"worried. That makes any one look old."

"Worried?" said Gibbs. "What did you have to worry about, Will?"

"I found myself falling behind in my work. I wouldn't have believed it. I don't mind telling you, Gibbs, it gave me a shock. I thought my capacity for work was on the wane."

"Gosh! but you've come back, Will. Boyce said you never worked so quick in your life. You cleaned up your desk in three hours—all that accumulation."

"They appreciated it, did they?"

"It's the talk of the office," said Gibbs.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

“You know how I did it, Gibbs?”

“You rested up—nothing in the world like it.”

“That helped. But do you want to know how I really did it, Gibbs?”

Gibbs stared at Skinner, interested.

“I made up my mind not to tell anybody about it until I’d proved it to my own satisfaction.”

“I see,” said Gibbs. “Go on.”

While Skinner was talking Honey, seated in her great armchair out in Meadville, was meditating on the little dinner party of two in New York. She knew both men so well that she could almost follow the little comedy that Skinner was playing, step by step. She was aware that Skinner was an arch-psychologist. Above all things, he understood how to avail himself of the force of opposition, contrariness. It was clear to her that he would talk in such a way as to engage Gibbs’s interest through his antagonism.

“Now, Gibbs,” Skinner urged, “don’t flare up the minute I tell you. It was this way—”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Gibbs held up an interrupting finger. "It don't relate to the operation of any of those old psalm-singing hypocrites, does it?" Gibbs suspected that there was a red flag hidden somewhere and was getting mad in advance.

"Just you wait!" said Skinner.

"Well, go ahead!" said Gibbs.

"Very good, then," Skinner began. His first words excited the old agnostic antagonism in Gibbs.

"Now, don't tell me it was that," said Gibbs. "Stop right there. It was the rest that did it—the fresh air—nothing but that."

"Wait now; don't get mad," and Skinner proceeded.

But Gibbs got madder and madder as Skinner went along. Nothing that he could say in favor of the agent of his increased efficiency seemed to do anything but irritate the old hidebound agnostic. "Bunk!" he broke in, whenever Skinner hesitated. "Bunk! Will, I didn't think you'd fall for any such bunk as that."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Hold on, Gibbs!" cried Skinner. "Let me tell you, step by step, how it was done, and then you can have the floor."

"Ugh!" said Gibbs, but resigned himself to listen respectfully.

As Skinner wound up his recital of the details of the operation of his scheme of self-reclamation, Gibbs laughed. "That's all very good, Will, all very good; and of course you believe it. But you're self-hypnotized, Will; you're self-hypnotized. You couldn't convince me in a thousand years."

"Don't want to convince you, Gibbs."

"Why not?" snapped the chronic antagonist.

"It wouldn't do you any good if you did believe."

"Why not?" Then exultantly: "Don't that show that you haven't any faith in it yourself, 'cause why wouldn't it do me good if it did you good?"

"Why, Gibbs," said Skinner, gently, "you're too old."

Too old! It was a punch right between

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

the eyes. Gibbs's color went a shade deeper. But he was a good sport. He didn't refer to the matter again until an hour later, when they bade each other good night at the Subway. Then, as he shook hands with Skinner, he said, "Will, let me give you a pointer. Don't tell that bunk to any one else. They'd only laugh at you."

Skinner felt that Gibbs had meant that as a parting shot. "I promise you I sha'n't." Then, "I sha'n't have to," he added to himself, as he went down the Subway steps.

Gibbs crossed to Fifth Avenue and turned south. The night was cool, but he was very hot. Occasionally he took off his hat and passed his handkerchief over his forehead. "Bunk!" he said. "Bunk!" He glanced into a window. The sight of his own reflection halted him. "Too old! The deuce I am!" He was so agitated that he even forgot to return the salute of his friend, the cop, at Thirty-fourth Street. Again he looked at his reflection in the next window. "Too old!"

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

And again and again and again, each time with increasing disgust.

When he got to his room he lighted the gas on both sides of his mirror and put his face up close and peered in. "Too old! Not much I ain't!" He turned from the mirror and proceeded to undress. "Darn his treacherous hide! I'll show him! I'll show him!"

Three days later Skinner was startled by an apparition as he entered the office. Sitting at Gibbs's accustomed place was a tall, handsome man with a clean-shaven red face and closely cropped hair.

"Good morning!" said the cheerful gentleman.

That unmistakable voice coming from that face! "Gibbs!" cried Skinner, and stood back. "Gibbs, I didn't know you! Great Scott! You look twenty-five years younger!" Thus, by a skilful touch, Skinner obliterated the wound he had reluctantly inflicted the night of the dinner.

Guenivere O'Brien, too, was duly startled and impressed by the appearance of Gibbs *sans* whiskers. "Why, Mr.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Gibbs!" she exclaimed, in wonder and admiration. "Why, Mr. Gibbs!" And Gibbs could see out of the tail of his eye that she was observing him surreptitiously during the day. But he did not realize the full measure of the effect of the change in his appearance on Guenivere until she said, very sweetly, "I know your work is rather trying, Mr. Gibbs, and I'm going to do all I can to make it easier for you." Then, mischievously, as she made the sign of stroking an imaginary beard: "It's great! Perfectly great!"

And thus Gibbs found that the thorn in his side had vanished simultaneously with his whiskers.

Skinner began to realize the economic influence of Gibbs's rejuvenation when, one day, Willard Jackson, of St. Paul, called.

"Who's the office-boy you've got out there, Skinner?" were Jackson's first words.

"Oh, that's the superintendent of the outside office."

"He's wonderful," said Jackson; "won-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

derful! Last time I came here you had a bullet-headed boy out there who told me you weren't in, when you were here all the time."

"I sacked him for that," said Skinner.

"This man didn't know me from Adam, but he treated me like a king when I came in. 'Skinner in?' said I.

"'No, sir,' said he, rising; 'but he'll be here presently.'

"Then he handed me a magazine. He noticed that I was a bit nettled at having to wait. And what do you think he did? He handed me a cigar—a darned good one, too! 'That 'll help pass the time for a few minutes, sir, until Mr. Skinner gets here.'

"His manners are fine, Skinner. They make you like him at once. He knows the world, that old chap does."

"That job of his requires tact," said Skinner.

"And he knows how to hold it down, all right." Jackson chuckled. "When he handed me the cigar I said, 'Is this personal or official?'

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

“And what do you suppose he said? ‘I should feel honored, sir, to consider it personal, but it’s official. It’s part of the new efficiency scheme of this house. We have instructions, sir, to make everybody comfortable.’”

When Jackson had gone Skinner called Gibbs in. “Gibbs, I want to congratulate you on the way you handled our biggest and toughest customer, Willard Jackson.”

“Great Scott!” exclaimed Gibbs. “Was that Willard Jackson? I thought he was only an ordinary man.”

“You won him completely,” Skinner went on. “You’re using your head, Gibbs.”

“I’m using my experience, Mr. Skinner.”

“Gibbs, I want you to draw on the house for any little extra expense you’re put to in running your department along your new lines of polite efficiency. Any little expense that your experience suggests. You understand, Gibbs?”

“Yes, Mr. Skinner”—turning to leave.

“Oh, Gibbs, who paid for those cigars?”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"That was my personal box, Mr. Skinner."

"Just include that in your expense account."

"No expense, Mr. Skinner. It was part of the box you gave me the other day. I don't smoke much, you know."

For a moment Skinner looked into the eyes of the superintendent of the outside office; then, "You weren't born yesterday, Gibbs."

"Thank you, Mr. Skinner."

One afternoon, a fortnight later, Gibbs circulated among the blue-envelope boys and made the mysterious request that each meet him in Skinner's office when the youngest partner should have left for the day. The request was accompanied with a significant look in each case, and each recipient thereof felt that Gibbs was about to disclose certain facts about which there had been much speculation of late among the blue-envelope members of the office force. Nor were they to be disappointed. Gibbs went into the matter with characteristic directness, once

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

they had congregated as per appointment.

"Boys, I've noticed that you've been watching me lately. You've been wondering at certain things." Gibbs paused and passed his hand over his chin significantly. "Also that I've been walking without the customary kink in my left knee. In accordance with your customary consideration for my feelings, you have refrained from a too-direct form of interrogation; but I could see that you were keenly alive to the change that has taken place in my appearance and also the very marked change in my spirits." He paused for proper theatrical effect. There were no comments, and he proceeded: "To begin with, it's a joke on Skinner."

"Certainly the joke isn't on you, Gibbs," observed Hemingway. "You look like a three-times winner."

"You bet it ain't on me!" Gibbs paused again. Again there was no comment. Again he proceeded. "You know Skinner claimed he took a ten days' rest.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

But he did more than that. He went and got himself rejuvenated." Another pause for theatrical effect. Another silence; then, "How do you suppose he did it?"

"Patent process?" suggested Boyce.

"Patent nothing!" Gibbs looked keenly from one to the other; then, with most deliberate emphasis, "Y.—M.—C.—A.!"

"Of course, you didn't believe him, Gibbs," said Boyce, who, next to Gibbs, was the leading cynic of the force.

"Not till I went there myself."

Gibbs enjoyed the amazement of the blue-envelope boys.

"You, Gibbs! You and the Y. M. C. A.!" said Williams.

"I wouldn't 'a' gone there at all if it hadn't been for Skinner," said Gibbs, feeling that the citadel of his agnosticism was falling.

"'Cause it did so much for him?" ventured Williams.

"No—'cause he said what it wouldn't do for me—that's what made me go. When he told me about his experience up there I said to him, 'Will, if that can do

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

so much for you in ten days, why can't it do something for me?" And what do you think he had the nerve to say? 'Gibbs, you're too old!"'

"It's a wonder he hadn't encouraged you, Gibbs—suggested it to you," observed Hemingway.

"I wouldn't 'a' done it in a thousand years if he had!" snapped Gibbs.

"While Skinner was trying to discourage you, Gibbs, he did the very best thing he could have done for you," observed Boyce, who prided himself that he always doped things out right.

"The joke is on Skinner, isn't it?" said Williams.

"The trouble with Skinner is he thinks he has an option on everything—even on youth," said Gibbs. "Just as if he owned youth."

"I've got it!" cried Boyce. "Skinner thinks we're all too old!"

"What makes you think that, Boyce?" said Hemingway, the ultra-conservative.

"I dope it out this way," said Boyce: "McLaughlin and Perkins are away.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

Skinner's in full charge. He's a young man, ambitious—he wants to make a record. He believes in young blood. Now don't you see, he put a lot of extra work on us so as to get us out—to put young fellows in for half-price?"

"You may be right," observed Hemingway; "but Skinner did me a heap of good when he gave me charge of the Northwest territory. It was like coming back to life. I take a new interest in things."

"So do I, for that matter," said Boyce. "I never felt so self-reliant in my life as I have since he gave me California."

"I never realized how much I could do until Skinner gave me new responsibilities," said Williams.

"Nor I," said Carlson.

"Now don't you see the joke's on Skinner?" said Gibbs. "The joke's on him all 'round!"

"Boys, do you reckon Skinner only waited for McLaughlin and Perkins to get away?" said Williams, suspiciously.

"I can't believe it of Skinner," Hemingway broke in.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"There are the facts," Boyce urged.

"But there's such a thing as misconstruing facts," insisted Hemingway.

"We've got to stall till McLaughlin gets back," suggested Carlson, timidly. "We've got to circumvent Skinner somehow."

"We have circumvented him," said Hemingway.

"Yes, so far as the extra work went," Carlson admitted. "But how about this idea of being too old?"

"Oh, rats!" said Williams, disgustedly. "Too old!"

"Rats, eh?" said Gibbs. "Let me tell you something. Boys, I learned a thing or two up at the Y. M. C. A. Age ain't a matter of years; it's a matter of condition."

"That lets me out," said Williams, who always prided himself that he was in the pink of condition.

"Does, eh—with that stomach?" said Gibbs, pointing. "Young men don't wear that sort of thing nowadays." He turned to Carlson. "Do like me, Carlson; chase

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

the whiskers—and straighten up! You used to be an athlete.” Then he swung to Boyce: “Your youth went with your hair, Boyce. Bring it back. And Hemingway, for goodness’ sake, chase that alpaca coat and somber tie. Be a little sporty—that’s it—be a little sporty—all of you!”

“I’m only forty-five,” urged Carlson.

“The trouble is,” said Gibbs, “you boys have set forty as the twelve o’clock of your lives. You ought to have set seventy for your twelve o’clock, if you had to set **any** time at all. The big men of the world never put any age limit on themselves. The twelve o’clock of their usefulness is rung by the sexton at the little old village church.”

“Cut out the sermon, Gibbs,” exclaimed Boyce. “Tell us how you did it.”

“That’s what we’re interested in,” Hemingway affirmed.

“Boys,” said Gibbs, beginning in the old-fashioned story-telling way, “Skinner’s words ‘too old’ made me madder and madder. So next night I took a

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

walk just to look the Y. M. C. A. over. There were a lot of gray-heads going into the building—old fellows, not like you or me, but really truly old fellows. I picked out the oldest one. ‘What’s going on,’ said I, ‘a lecture for old men?’

“‘Lecture nothing!’ he snapped. ‘Gym.’

“‘Gosh!’ said I to myself, ‘and Skinner said *I* was too old. Gosh!’

“Well, I went in with the rest of ‘em. I asked the clerk at the desk where I could see the superintendent of the gym.

“‘The physical director?’ said he.

“‘He’ll do,’ said I.

“‘Sixth floor, turn to the right and ask for Doctor Louis Welzmiller. They’ll show you.’

“I went up there. They had a class on. There were a lot of tubby men and skinny men and young men and old men and bald-heads and shock-heads in gym suits going through all kinds of physical stunts. I stood there and watched ‘em for a while and kept saying to myself, ‘I wonder if I could do that. . . . No, I

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

couldn't. . . . I wonder if I could.' And all the time Skinner's words 'too old' kept running through my head—holding me back, pushing me forward, holding me back. Then I said to myself, 'By jingo! I will do it!'

"The doctor was a young fellow—said he was forty-eight, but he looked about thirty—quick, decided, business-like, but a good sort. 'Tell me, Doctor,' I said, pointing to the old fellows on the floor, 'between man and man, ain't there a good deal of bunk in this? Ain't they fooling themselves?'

"The doctor didn't cotton to the way I put it, I could see that; but he sensed my state of mind.

"'See that man over there,' said he. 'That's the liveliest man we've got; leads all the rest. He's seventy-nine years old. That's the answer.'

"'Gosh!' said I. 'Ain't there any age limit?'

"'None that I know of,' said he.

"'But what's the idea?' said I.

"He gave an impatient shrug of his

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

shoulders. 'Doctor,' said I, 'I'm not talking for talk's sake. If there's any good in this I want to get it.'

"'This is the idea,' said he, pleased by my sincerity. 'I'll tell you my theory. I reverse the old saying, "A man plays because he's young." I put it, "A man's young because he plays." See? A man is rejuvenated when he does the things that the young do.'

"'I get you,' said I.

"'That's the psychological part,' the doctor went on. 'Here's the physical: The old saying is, "A man must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow." I say, "He must earn his health by the sweat of his body." You exercise and thus drive the impurities of the blood out through the pores of the skin in the form of sweat. At the same time you limber up. Your old, unused muscles come into play. You find that you have a lot of machinery that you've never availed of. Exercise makes your heart beat strong and pushes your blood through your veins at a good clip. You get a forced draft

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

through your nose. You breathe deep. Your lungs expand, take in more oxygen and force it and other food materials into the blood, which makes it rich and red. That's the way we get ginger into you, make you know you're all alive—not half-dead, an old engine with its fires banked, creeping along.'

"How about efficiency?" I suggested, when I could get a word in.

"That's obvious," said he. "Improve the physical end of you, and it reacts on the mental. It makes you see things in a new light, changes you right about face. If you're depressed, it makes you cheerful. If you're discouraged, it makes you hopeful. With renewed hope comes new energy. You get steam up strong. You want to go right out and do things. You'd burst if you didn't. You turn off more work. You don't get tired and disheartened. My dear boy, I've seen the efficiency of men increased one hundred per cent.—doubled."

"That sounded pretty big to me, boys, till I thought of Skinner's experience.

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

You saw for yourselves how he turned off work when he got back."

The blue-envelope boys nodded confirmatively.

"But still I was a little bit doubtful," Gibbs went on, "so I said, 'You mean young men, don't you, Doctor?'

"'All men,' said he. 'There's a man of sixty here. I saw a marked change in him in three days.'

"'That settles it,' said I; 'the gym for mine!'"

"How did you feel the first night you went up there, Gibbs, with those skinny old shanks of yours?" said Williams, still smarting under Gibbs's allusion to his waist-line.

"A little timid about going on the floor," said Gibbs, ignoring the shot, "but Skinner's words 'too old' urged me on. The second night I felt more at home, and the third I was a veteran, ready to pity or patronize any new-comer.

"Boys, it's play; it isn't work. Everything is done to music. A boy sits at a piano and hammers out ragtime. First,

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

you take a pair of dumb-bells, hold 'em in the air, then bend over and touch the floor with 'em. I could feel my main hinges creak when I did that, and I got out of breath, but Skinner's words 'too old' kept me at it. When I got tired, I rested. For you don't have to keep up with the others. You can do as you please—drop out and watch them and join in again. But, hang it all! I wanted to keep up! It got into my blood—the music, the good cheer, the enthusiasm. I was right in among a bunch of young men. They paced me a little too strenuously, but I didn't stop. I took deep breaths. Gosh all fish-hooks! how I breathed! There were corners in my lungs that hadn't known fresh air for years, and when I sent the oxygen down there I could almost feel 'em beginning to work.

"Gosh! boys, it was dumb-bells up, dumb-bells down, then bend over with legs apart and touch the floor with 'em. Then it was sit on the floor and manipulate your legs. Then it was lie on your back and hold your legs in the air and

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

gyrate them, first to the right, then to the left. And when those young fellows did it I did it, too; not quite so fast or so long, but I did it. Then it was lie on your stomach with legs and arms outstretched, like a jolly old bullfrog. Seems queer when I tell it, but you don't mind it, 'cause they're all doing it; you're just one of 'em. You get the mob spirit. And the blood begins to circulate up and down your old legs and turn 'em red. And you feel the spirit of youth creeping into you. And the blood comes to your face and you pant like a tired dog, but you're happy, boys, you're happy, boys, 'cause you know you're coming back."

Gibbs paused for a moment, then more quietly: "Boys, they're makin' 'em over fast up there. They're makin' 'em over while you wait. They're makin' 'em over wholesale." Gibbs paused again. "That's all," he said.

"What time does your class begin?" said Hemingway, consulting his watch.

Gibbs threw out his chest. "Business men's class at five-thirty."

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"What do you say we go up and look the thing over?" Hemingway suggested.

And the blue-envelope boys, with one accord, quickly got their hats and coats and went.

Skinner waited and watched. If Skinner was anything at all, he was a judge of men. McLaughlin used to say of him that his ability to call the turn on what persons would do or would not do under certain circumstances was almost uncanny. He was sure, though he didn't take the trouble to 'phone the Y. M. C. A. for confirmation, that Gibbs had joined the rejuvenation class. And he had observed the other blue-envelope boys observing Gibbs, and he knew that their turn would come next. And he knew that it would be kept a profound secret from him, Skinner.

A month later Skinner said to Honey, "By jingo! the blue-envelope boys have got their second wind, all right!"

"They ought to. Four weeks at the gym."

"I mean mental wind, the kind Pro-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

fessor James used to talk about. And you don't know the pleasure it gives me, Honey, as a friend, to see them come back. But as an employer, I realize more and more every day the economic value of my big idea. I've noticed from little things that they are beginning to scheme, project. Their newly developed energy is like new wine in old bottles. It wants to burst out in all directions. They constantly come to me with suggestions. And about twenty-five per cent. of their suggestions are valuable. So you see how profitable it is to the house to encourage them in using their wits. By the way, here's what I cabled Mac to-day."

Honey took the slip of paper and read:

"Got rid of all the old fellows. Filled positions with much younger and much more efficient men."

When McLaughlin, sitting with Perkins in the office of their hotel in Buenos Aires, received Skinner's cable, both were jubilant.

"By jingo! you were wise to suggest

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

such a thing, Mac," cried Perkins, slapping his partner on the back.

"Of course, it was the right thing to do," said McLaughlin; "anybody could see that. But the wisest part was to let Skinner do it. You or I would have bungled it, Perk—you with your cold, glittering polish or I with my brutal brusqueness, that our friends talk about."

But the satisfaction McLaughlin and Perkins felt at the successful execution of their scheme for the injection of new blood into their office force in New York was short-lived, for the next day they were shocked by the news that Uncle Sam had severed diplomatic relations with the Kaiser.

"Devil of a note, isn't it?" said Perkins, disgustedly.

"It means war," said McLaughlin. He pondered a bit; then, "Perk, those young fellows that Skinner took on will have to go."

"Devil of a note!"—more disgustedly.

"Leaves us in the lurch, doesn't it?"

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Devil of a note!"—more disgustedly still.

"Perk, we must act at once. I shall go right back to help Skinner out. You stay down here and finish things up."

McLaughlin and his wife reached New York early one morning. "You go home, Lillie," said McLaughlin, "and I'll look after the baggage and then go direct to the office."

Two hours later the senior partner entered the office of McLaughlin, Perkins & Skinner. He got a shock when his eyes fell on Gibbs, smartly dressed and *sans* whiskers.

"By jingo!" he said to himself. "By jingo!"

He looked 'round quickly. There was Williams, noticeably reduced in girth and looking years younger; and Boyce, with a toupee that had clipped years off his age; and Carlson, gentle Carlson, who used to hide behind his whiskers—where were those whiskers now? Yes, that was Carlson, his face almost as chubby as a boy's. But Hemingway's appearance astonished

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

McLaughlin most, for Hemingway had gone the limit.

He wore a checked suit and he had acquired spats and a smart polka-dot tie. McLaughlin pulled himself together and greeted them all.

“By jingo!” he said to himself. “Skinner’s got ‘em back already! Thank the Lord, he’s got ‘em back! By jingo! Skinner’s a dandy!”

McLaughlin’s first words after greeting Skinner in his private room were, “What does it mean, Skinner?” He indicated the outside office with a motion of the hand.

And Skinner told McLaughlin all about it—from beginning to end. When he had finished McLaughlin jumped up and grabbed his hand and shook it savagely.

“By jingo! Skinner, you don’t know how relieved I am at what you’ve done. I never was so worried in my life. I’m going to cable this to Perk if it costs me five hundred dollars. He’s got lots of trouble on his mind, and I want him to have a good laugh.”

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

"Give him my love," said Skinner; "even if it costs two dollars more."

"You bet I will!" said McLaughlin.

McLaughlin wrote out the cable and despatched it. Then he turned to Skinner. "Ask the boys to come in here, will you?" He looked at Skinner with a meaning twinkle in his eyes. "You know, the blue-envelope boys. I want to tell 'em something."

Presently the blue-envelope boys filed in—the rejuvenated, alert, young-old blue-envelope boys.

McLaughlin bit the tip of a cigar and looked from one to another rather wonderingly. He was not yet accustomed to their changed appearance.

"Boys," he said, presently, "Mr. Skinner has told me about the splendid work you have done. Of course, it was no more than I expected. I knew you were capable of rising to any emergency."

"Thank you, Mr. McLaughlin," said Hemingway.

Skinner turned and, thrusting his tongue into his cheek, crossed to the win-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

dow and looked out at the traffic in the street.

"However, I congratulate you," McLaughlin went on. "I heartily congratulate you on the decision, the initiative you've shown. But I always knew you had it in you."

And Skinner congratulated himself that he had a partner who was so good an actor.

The climax of Skinner's effort to save the aces and the kings from the discard—to bring the old men back to life, to make them the fashion—was not reached until war was declared and Uncle Sam began to put the conscription act into effect. And the conscription act hit McLaughlin, Perkins & Skinner pretty hard. Four very promising young men—Mitchell, Fredericks, Winant, and Lateret—were called to the colors. McLaughlin was genuinely affected as the youngsters, one by one, bade him good-by, and when they'd gone he said to Skinner: "Those boys are going to fight for us. We must

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

look after their folks while they're gone. I don't imagine they've got any money saved up, do you?"

"We'll do it anyhow," said Skinner.

"Right-o!"

An hour later McLaughlin asked Skinner to summon the blue-envelope boys, and when those gentlemen appeared he said: "Boys, the situation is very serious. You know that as well as I. How long this thing is going to last nobody can tell. The youngsters 'll all have to go, just as Mitchell and Fredericks and Winant and Lateret had to go. Of course there'll be a demand for older men. Other concerns will try to get you away from us—if they haven't already done so." He looked from one to another.

"We've already had offers," said Hemingway.

"Only one thing—I want you to give us a chance to meet any offer you may get. I promise you I'll do better by you than anybody else would."

"You needn't worry about that, Mr. McLaughlin," said Hemingway; "we've

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

talked it all over among ourselves. You see, we've been here a long time. You've always treated us well. You've paid us fair salaries. And we don't mind telling you that we love this business and we love this office. It's like home to us. We wouldn't think of leaving you in the lurch. Not for a minute!"

McLaughlin glanced furtively at Skinner, but the youngest partner was looking out the window. Skinner didn't have his tongue in his cheek this time, either.

There was a pause; then Hemingway said: "Mr. McLaughlin, we've made up our minds to stand by the ship, sink or swim; but there's just one thing we want to ask."

"What is it?" said McLaughlin, eager to make any concession the blue-envelope boys might suggest.

"We can't go to the Front," said Hemingway, "because we're beyond the age, but we want to do our bit. We're able and willing to do all the work in the office—you won't have to get any one else—if you will pay Mitchell and Fred-

## SKINNER'S BIG IDEA

ericks and Winant and Lateret the difference between what the Government pays them and what they get here."

McLaughlin laughed joyously. "I've got one on you, boys. Skinner and I have already arranged to do that."

When the blue-envelope boys had filed out of the office and the door had closed McLaughlin rose and crossed to where Skinner was standing looking out at the traffic in the street. The partners looked into each other's eyes for a moment, and a heap of understanding passed between them in that look. Then McLaughlin put his hand on Skinner's shoulder and said, in a voice that was just a bit unsteady, "That was a big idea of yours, Skinner—a damned big idea."

THE END





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